

CHAPTER XXIV.

The month of July was near its end.

On the morning of the twenty-eighth, Carmina was engaged in replying to a letter received from Teresa. Her answer contained a record of domestic events, during an interval of serious importance in her life under Mrs. Gallilee's roof. Translated from the Italian, the letter was expressed in these terms:

"Are you vexed with me, dearest, for this late reply to your sad news from Italy? I have but one excuse to offer.

"Can I hear of your anxiety about your husband, and not feel the wish to help you to bear your burden by writing cheerfully of myself? Over and over again, I have thought of you and have opened my desk. My spirits have failed me, and I have shut it up again. Am I now in a happier frame of mind? Yes, my good old nurse, I am happier. I have had a letter from Ovid.

"He has arrived safely at Quebec, and he is beginning to feel better already, after the voyage. You cannot imagine how beautifully, how tenderly he writes! I am almost reconciled to his absence, when I read his letter. Will that give you some idea of the happiness and the consolation that I owe to this best and dearest of men?

"Ah, my old granny, I see you start, and make that favourite mark with your thumb-nail under the word 'consolation'! I hear you say to yourself, 'Is she unhappy in her English home? And is Aunt Gallilee to blame for it?' Yes! it is even so. What I would not for the whole world write to Ovid, I may confess to you. Aunt Gallilee is indeed a hard, hard woman.

"Do you remember telling me, in your dear downright way, that Mr. Le Frank looked like a rogue? I don't know whether he is a rogue--but I do know that it is through his conduct that my aunt is offended with me.

"It happened three weeks ago.

"She sent for me, and said that my education must be completed, and that my music in particular must be attended to. I was quite willing to obey her, and I said so with all needful readiness and respect. She answered that she had already chosen a music-master for me--and then, to my astonishment,

she mentioned his name. Mr. Le Frank, who taught her children, was also to teach me! I have plenty of faults, but I really think vanity is not one of them. It is only due to my excellent master in Italy to say, that I am a better pianoforte player than Mr. Le Frank.

"I never breathed a word of this, mind, to my aunt. It would have been ungrateful and useless. She knows and cares nothing about music.

"So we parted good friends, and she wrote the same evening to engage my master. The next day she got his reply. Mr. Le Frank refused to be my professor of music--and this, after he had himself proposed to teach me, in a letter addressed to my aunt! Being asked for his reasons, he made an excuse. The spare time at his disposal, when he had written, had been since occupied by another pupil. The true reason for his conduct is, that he heard me speak of him--rashly enough, I don't deny it--as an ugly man and a bad player. Miss Minerva sounded him on the subject, at my request, for the purpose of course of making my apologies. He affected not to understand what she meant--with what motive I am sure I don't know. False and revengeful, you may say, and perhaps you may be right. But the serious part of it, so far as I am concerned, is my aunt's behaviour to me. If I had thwarted her in the dearest wish of her life, she could hardly treat me with greater coldness and severity. She has not stirred again, in the matter of my education. We only meet at meal-times; and she receives me, when I sit down at table, as she might receive a perfect stranger. Her icy civility is unendurable. And this woman is my darling Ovid's mother!

"Have I done with my troubles now? No, Teresa; not even yet. Oh, how I wish I was with you in Italy!

"Your letters persist in telling me that I am deluded in believing Miss Minerva to be truly my friend. Do pray remember--even if I am wrong--what a solitary position mine is, in Mrs. Gallilee's house! I can play with dear little Zo; but whom can I talk to, whom can I confide in, if it turns out that Miss Minerva has been deceiving me?

"When I wrote to you, I refused to acknowledge that any such dreadful discovery as this could be possible; I resented the bare idea of it as a cruel insult to my friend. Since that time--my face burns with shame while I write it--I am a little, just a little, shaken in my own opinion.

"Shall I tell you how it began? Yes; I will.

"My good old friend, you have your prejudices. But you speak your mind

truly--and whom else can I consult? Not Ovid! The one effort of my life is to prevent him from feeling anxious about me. And, besides, I have contended against his opinion of Miss Minerva, and have brought him to think of her more kindly. Has he been right, notwithstanding? and are you right? And am I alone wrong? You shall judge for yourself.

"Miss Minerva began to change towards me, after I had done the thing of all others which ought to have brought us closer together than ever. She is very poorly paid by my aunt, and she has been worried by little debts. When she owned this, I most willingly lent her the money to pay her bills--a mere trifle, only thirty pounds. What do you think she did? She crushed up the bank-notes in her hand, and left the room in the strangest headlong manner--as if I had insulted her instead of helping her! All the next day, she avoided me. The day after, I myself went to her room, and asked what was the matter. She gave me a most extraordinary answer. She said, 'I don't know which of us two I most detest--myself or you. Myself for borrowing your money, or you for lending it.' I left her; not feeling offended, only bewildered and distressed. More than an hour passed before she made her excuses. 'I am ill and miserable'--that was all she said. She did indeed look so wretched that I forgave her directly. Would you not have done so too, in my place?

"This happened a fortnight since. Only yesterday, she broke out again, and put my affection for her to a far more severe trial. I have not got over it yet.

"There was a message for her in Ovid's letter--expressed in the friendliest terms. He remembered with gratitude her kind promise, on saying good-bye; he believed she would do all that lay in her power to make my life happy in his absence; and he only regretted her leaving him in such haste that he had no time to thank her personally. Such was the substance of the message. I was proud and pleased to go to her room myself, and read it to her.

"Can you guess how she received me? Nobody--I say it positively--nobody could guess.

"She actually flew into a rage! Not only with me (which I might have pardoned), but with Ovid (which is perfectly inexcusable). 'How dare he write to you,' she burst out, 'of what I said to him when we took leave of each other? And how dare you come here, and read it to me? What do I care about your life, in his absence? Of what earthly consequence are his remembrance and his gratitude to Me!' She spoke of him, with such fury and such contempt, that she roused me at last. I said to her, 'You abominable woman, there is but one excuse for you--you're mad!' I left the

room--and didn't I bang the door! We have not met since. Let me hear your opinion, Teresa. I was in a passion when I told her she was mad; but was I altogether wrong? Do you really think the poor creature is in her right senses?

"Looking back at your letter, I see that you ask if I have made any new acquaintances.

"I have been introduced to one of the sweetest women I ever met with. And who do you think she is? My other aunt--Mrs. Gallilee's younger sister, Lady Northlake! They say she was not so handsome as Mrs. Gallilee, when they were both young. For my part, I can only declare that no such comparison is possible between them now. In look, in voice, in manner there is something so charming in Lady Northlake that I quite despair of describing it. My father used to say that she was amiable and weak; led by her husband, and easily imposed upon. I am not clever enough to have his eye for character: and perhaps I am weak and easily imposed upon too. Before I had been ten minutes in Lady Northlake's company, I would have given everything I possess in the world to have had her for my guardian.

"She had called to say good-bye, on leaving London; and my aunt was not at home. We had a long delightful talk together. She asked me so kindly to visit her in Scotland, and be introduced to Lord Northlake, that I accepted the invitation with a glad heart.

"When my aunt returned, I quite forgot that we were on bad terms. I gave her an enthusiastic account of all that had passed between her sister and myself. How do you think she met this little advance on my part? She positively refused to let me go to Scotland.

"As soon as I had in some degree got over my disappointment, I asked for her reasons. 'I am your guardian,' she said; 'and I am acting in the exercise of my own discretion. I think it better you should stay with me.' I made no further remark. My aunt's cruelty made me think of my dead father's kindness. It was as much as I could do to keep from crying.

"Thinking over it afterwards, I supposed (as this is the season when everybody leaves town) that she had arranged to take me into the country with her. Mr. Gallilee, who is always good to me, thought so too, and promised me some sailing at the sea-side. To the astonishment of everybody, she has not shown any intention of going away from London! Even the servants ask what it means.

"This is a letter of complaints. Am I adding to your anxieties instead of relieving them? My kind old nurse, there is no need to be anxious. At the worst of my little troubles, I have only to think of Ovid--and his mother's ice melts away from me directly; I feel brave enough to endure anything.

"Take my heart's best love, dear--no, next best love, after Ovid!--and give some of it to your poor suffering husband. May I ask one little favour? The English gentleman who has taken our old house at Rome, will not object to give you a few flowers out of what was once my garden. Send them to me in your next letter."